issues and regular exchanges are taking place at various levels with the objective of achieving continuous improvement of bilateral relations

(c) to (d) The third meeting of the Special Representatives of the Governments of India and China on the Boundary Question was held in New Delhi on July 26-27, 2004. The meeting between the National Security Advisor, Shri J N Dixit and the Vice Foreign Minister, Mr. Dai Bingguo, Special Representatives of India and China respectively, was held in a friendly, constructive and cooperative atmosphere The two sides agreed to hold the next meeting in Beijing at a mutually convenient date

Kidnapping of truck drivers in Iraq

1704. SHRI DATTA MEGHE Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state

(a) whether three Indian truck drivers operating in Iraq have been kidnapped by a militant group which has threatened to behead them unless India ensures that no Indian provides any kind of service support to the US Army in Iraq;

(b) if so, the details in regard thereto,

(c) the measures taken by Government for safe release of these Indian truck drivers, and

(d) the success achieved in these efforts?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E AHAMMED) (a) and (b) On the night of 21st July, 2004 it was learnt from a news agency report that three Indian nationals identified as Antaryami Bains, Tilak Raj and Sukhdev Singh were among the seven persons taken hostage by an Iraqi group identified as "The Holders of the Black Banners" The hostages included in addition three Kenyans and one Egyptian They were all employed as heavy vehicle drivers by the Kuwait based company, Kuwait and Gulf Link Transport Co. (KGL) The kidnappers in a statement reported by the media demanded withdrawal of all citizens including troops belonging to the countries of the hostages from Iraq and an end to the activities of the transport company in Iraq The Group theratened to behead a hostage every 72 hours unless these demands are met

(c) Immediately after the hostage taking was reported, the Government initiated action forthwith to secure their release. Senior officials of the Ministry of External Affairs contacted Indian Missions in Baghdad and Kuwait to explore all possibilities to ensure safety of the hostages and their early release. Minister of State (MoS) for External Affairs, Shri E. Ahammed spoke to the Charge d'Affairs in Embassy of India, Baghdad and the Indian Ambassador in Kuwait. A Crisis Management Group was constituted under the Chairmanship of Shri Ahammed (MoS) and a Control Room was made operative in Ministry of External Affairs. Minister of External Affairs, Shri K Natwar Singh appealed to the kidnappers through Arab TV network for release of the hostages who are innocent civilians and not combatants The Government also contacted the Governments of Egypt and Kenya whose nationals are among the hostages for inputs to work for the release of the hostages. Our Mission in Kuwait has been in touch with the transport company KGL from the very begining of the abduction and received assurance from the company that it will take all possible steps to ensure release and safe return of the kidnapped drivers

The situation is constantly being monitored by the Crisis Management Group which meets regularly and frequently to review strategies to secure safe and early release of hostages. Shri E. Ahammed, MoS has issued two appeals to the kidnappers through Arabic TV network highlighting historical relations between India and Iraq and India's well-known and principled position and concern for the welfare and well-being of Iraqi people and their country and requesting for immediate release of the hostages. He also made an appeal to the captors in Arabic language for release of the hostages on humanitarian grounds. Religious leaders in Iraq and other Gulf countries were contacted to intercede for the release of the hostages. Ambassador of India in Muscat, Shri Talmiz Ahmad along with an Arabic interpreter has been deputed to Iraq to monitor and report on the developments and to assist in the work of the Indian mission for early and safe release of the hostages Cabinet Secretary has been regularly holding inter-Ministerial/Departmental meetings to review the situation and the ongoing efforts to secure the release of the hostages. External Affairs Minister has been following developments closely and giving directions whenever necessary The Prime Minister and the CCPA have also held meeting to review developments

(d) Efforts are continuing to get their release. The deadline set by the kidnappers has been extended several times and the talks between the transport company KGL and the kidnappers through mediators are continuing.

Attack on Indians in Gulf

1705. SHRI A. VIJAYARAGHAVAN: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether the authorities are aware of the increasing attacks towards the life and property of Indian citizens working in Gulf countries and other middle east countries;

(b) if so, the details of such attacks including loss of property and life for the last three years, year-wise, country-wise and category-wise;

(c) whether any action is taken for an early access of the Indian citizens to the Indian Embassies after the mishap;

(d) if so, the details thereof, and

(e) the financial compensation, if any, provided to above Indian citizens and the reasons for increasing number of such incidents towards Indians?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E AHAMMED) : (a) No. There are no reports of increasing attacks on Indians in Gulf countries and other middle east countries,

(b) Does not arise

(c) and (d) Indian Missions/Posts abroad are always accessible to Indians including those in distress. In countries with large number of Indians workers, Indian Missions/Posts have separate Labour/Welfare wings to attend to issues and problems faced by them. From 8th of July our Mission in Riyadh and Jeddah have started "Open House" on Second Thrusday of every month from 2 pm to 5 pm for Indians in Saudi Arabia to interact with Mission Officials to resolve their problems, if any. In Riyadh 24 hr Helpline has started for Indian national to interact about problems, if any

(e) Does not arise.